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ABSTRACT

The issue of the public's ability to differentiate between psychologists and psychiatrists has frequently been raised. A survey was conducted to assess the public's knowledge of and preferences for the mental health services of psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, clergy, and physicians. The subjects were 136 adults of diverse socioeconomic levels residing in the Long Island, New York area. Subjects completed a questionnaire tapping the public's preferences for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, clergy, and physicians with respect to mental health problems varying in severity. Subjects were surveyed regarding the type of professional they would seek out for specific kinds of therapy (adult psychotherapy, child psychotherapy, behavior therapy, marriage counseling) and their understanding of the educational credentials and professional functions of each professional group. The results indicated that psychiatrists were the most preferred of the professional groups for relatively severe mental health problems while psychologists were preferred over psychiatrists for marital therapy, child psychotherapy, and behavior therapy. Psychologists and psychiatrists were equally preferred for adult psychotherapy and for the treatment of anxiety and depression. The mental health services of social workers, clergy, and physicians were less in public demand than were the services of psychologists and psychiatrists. The public exhibited a relatively accurate understanding of the credentials and functions of psychiatrists and psychologists. (Author/NB)

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The Public's Knowledge of and Preferences for the Mental Health Services of Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Other Helping Professionals

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Running head: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS HELPING PROFESSIONALS

Abstract

A survey was conducted to assess the public's knowledge of and preferences for the mental health services of psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, clergy, and physicians. The subjects were 136 adults of diverse socioeconomic levels residing in the Long Island, New York area. The results indicated that psychiatrists were the most preferred of the professional groups for relatively severe mental health problems while psychologists were preferred over psychiatrists for marital therapy, child psychotherapy, and behavior therapy. Psychologists and psychiatrists were equally preferred for adult psychotherapy and for the treatment of anxiety and depression. The mental health services of social workers, clergy, and physicians were in less public demand than the services of psychologists and psychiatrists. The public exhibited a relatively accurate understanding of the credentials and functions of psychiatrists and psychologists.

The Public's Knowledge of and Preferences for the Mental Health Services of Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Other Helping Professionals

Psychologists are relative newcomers to the field of private psychotherapeutic practice. Although the origins of clinical psychology can be traced to Witmer's use of the term in 1896 (Korchin, 1976, p. 43) clinical psychology did not emerge as a major force in the mental health scene until the end of World War II. Physicians, on the other hand, have practiced specialized techniques for diagnosing and treating mental health problems since the time of Hippocrates (Hippocrates, fifth century B.C./1939).

The issue of the public's ability to differentiate between psychologists and psychiatrists has frequently been raised in discussions of public attitudes towards these two groups. Amrine (1965, p. 809) noted that psychology and psychiatry remained "...almost 'hopelessly' mixed up in the public mind." On the basis of extensive survey research Nunnally (1961, p. 59) concluded that the public does not make connotative distinctions between the terms psychologist and psychiatrist "...perhaps because the public does not differentiate between words beginning with the common morpheme 'psych'."

Other research has indicated that the public is aware that psychologists and psychiatrists possess different educational credentials and perform different professional functions. In

a telephone survey of 400 residents of St. Louis, Missouri, Thumin and Zebelman (1967) found that the public associated the MD degree with psychiatrists to a much greater degree than with psychologists. IQ testing, on the other hand, was associated with psychologists more often than psychiatrists. In a related survey, Clark and Martire (1978, p. 15) interviewed 250 persons from across the country and found that "the medical training of psychiatrists and their ability to administer drugs are two of the primary ways in which psychiatrists are distinguished from other mental health professionals."

Research also indicates that public preferences for the services of psychologists and psychiatrists vary as a function of the severity of the mental health problem under consideration. Psychiatrists are preferred over psychologists for the treatment of severe problems such as "nervous breakdown" (Zolik & Stotsky, 1966) and "mental illness" (Nunnally, 1961, p. 61; Thumin & Zebelman, 1967) while psychologists and psychiatrists are equally preferred for the treatment of less severe problems such as "emotional disturbance" (Zolik & Stotsky, 1966; Clark & Martire, 1978). Psychologists are preferred over psychiatrists for the administration of play therapy, family therapy (Morrison & Thomas, 1975), and marital therapy (Thumin & Zebelman, 1967).

The present study investigated the degree to which the public differentiates between psychologists and psychiatrists in their preferences for various types of mental health services. To serve as a reference point, public preferences for mental health services administered by social workers, family

physicians, and clergy were also assessed. In order to illuminate some of the possible reasons behind mental health preferences, the public's familiarity with the eductional credentials and professional functions of psychologists and psychiatrists was assessed.

Method

Subjects

A total of 136 subjects were recruited from various shopping malls and other public places on Long Island, New York. Days and times of survey administration were randomized to reduce selection bias.

The socioeconomic status of subjects was rated according to Hollingshead's (1965) two factor system. The results indicated that 7% of the sample fell within the upper socioeconomic division, 65% fell within the middle category and 27% fell within the lower division. The mean age of the sample was 33.9 years. Thirty-two percent of the subjects were between 18 and 23 years of age, 28% were between 26 and 34, 17% were between 35 and 49, and 21% were 50 or over. Forty-seven percent of the sample were male while 53% were female.

Procedure

A 28-item questionnaire was developed to tap the public's preferences for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, clergy, and physicians with respect to mental health problems varying in severity. The public was also surveyed regarding the type of professional they would seek out for specific kinds of therapy, i.e., adult psychotherapy, child psychotherapy, behavior

therapy, and marriage counseling. This survey included questions to assess the public's understanding of the educational credentials and professional functions of each professional group. Multiple choice alternatives for "Don't know" and "Other" were included for each survey question. The questionnaires were administered during the summer of 1983 by the authors of this study.

Results

The proportion of subjects selecting each response alternative (i.e., "psychologist," "psychiatrist," etc...) was calculated for each of the survey questions. The statistical question of interest was whether the proportion of subjects giving the response "psychologist" to a given question was significantly greater than the proportion giving the response "psychiatrist." Because subjects were free to select more than one alternative in response to each question, the resulting proportions were not statistically independent. The statistical significance of the difference between proportunes was assessed with a technique developed by McNemar (1969, pp. 52-56). This technique uses the z distribution to evaluate the significance of he difference between nonindependent proportions. Two-tailed tests were used for setting significance levels.

Knowledge of Educational Credentials

The survey results indicated that a majority of respondents were familiar with the educational credentials of psychologists and psychiatrists. In response to the question, "Which of the following professionals typically has an MD degree?", 64% of the

sample correctly responded "psychiatrist" while only 12% incorrectly indicated "psychologist." The proportion of subjects selecting psychiatrists for this question was significantly larger than the proportion selecting psychologists $z = 6.46$, $p<.001$. Nearly all subjects were aware that physicians possessed an MD degree (96%) while very few associated the MD degree with clergy (1%) or social workers (1%).

When subjects were asked, "Which of the following professionals typically has a PhD degree?", 72% of the respondents selected psychologists, while 42% incorrectly indicated psychiatrists. The proportion of subjects selecting psychologists was significantly larger than the proportion selecting psychiatrists $z = 3.54$, $p<.001$. Subjects within in the lower socioeconomic category were less aware of the educational credentials of both psychologists and psychiatrists than subjects in the higher socioeconomic groups. A relatively small number of subjects associated the PhD degree with physicians (23%), clergy (17%), or social workers (16%).

In response to the question, "Which occupation(s) require a license to practice in New York State?", 73% of the sample indicated psychologists and 90% indicated psychiatrists. These two sample proportions were significantly different from one another $z = 3.59$, $p<.001$. Relatively few respondents demonstrated an awareness that social workers were licensed in New York State (34%).

Knowledge of Professional Services

Respondents demonstrated that they were familiar with many of the professional roles and functions performed by psychologists and psychiatrists. In response to the question, "Which of the following professionals can prescribe medication?", 73% indicated psychiatists while only 11% incorrectly indicated psychologists. These two proportions were significantly different $z = 8.73$, $p<.001$. No subjects indicated that social workers or clergy prescribed medication (see Table 1).

In response to the question, "Who can admit or discharge patients from a psychiatric hospital in New York State?", 83% of respondents selected psychiatrists while only 13% attributed hospital privileges to psychologists, $z = 10.49$, $p<.001$. Subjects rarely attributed hospitalization privileges to social workers (0%) or clergy (1%).

Most survey respondents associated intelligence testing with psychologists. In response to the question, "Who would you go to for intelligence testing?", 61% of respondents indicated psychologists while only 17% selected psychiatrists $z = 5.02$, $p<.001$. Intelligence testing was rarely associated with physicians (2%), social workers (4%) or clergy (0%).

Therapy Preferences

Public preferences for psychological and psychiatric services varied depending upon the specific type of therapy under consideration. In response to the question, "Who would you go to for adult psychotherapy?", nearly equal proportions of subjects

Table 1

The Percentage of Subjects Attributing Specific Educational Credentials and Professional Services to Psychologists and Other Helping Professionals

Questions	Psycho. %	Psychi. %	Clergy %	Physi. %	Social Worker %	DK %	Other %
			Educational Credentials				
Holds an MD	12	64	1	96	1	2	0
Holds a PhD	72	42	17	23	16	7	7
Licensed in New York State	73	90	23	99	34	1	1
			Professional Services				
Prescribes medication	11	73	0	97	0	0	1
Admits and discharges psychiatric patients	13	83	0	44	1	7	4
Intelligence testing	61	17	0	2	4	18	20

Note. Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers. These percentages do not sum to 100 because subjects were free to select more than one response alternative for each question.

Psycho. = Psychologist
Psychi. = Psychiatrist
Physi. = Physician
DK = Don't know

selected psychologists (63%) and psychiatrists (65%) z = .258, p>.50. The public rarely indicated that they would seek out social workers, clergy, or physicians for adult psychotherapy (see Table 2).

Subjects preferred psychologists over psychiatrists for the services of child psychotherapy. In response to the question, "Who would you go to for child psychotherapy?", 63% indicated that they would seek the services of a psychologist while 46% indicated that they would seek the services of a psychiatrist z = 2.62, p<.001. Subjects also indicated that they preferred psychologists over psychiatrists for the administration of behavior therapy. When subjects were asked, "Who would you go to for behavior therapy?", 69% indicated psychologists while only 39% indicated psychiatrists z = 3.43, p<.001. The public rarely selected other professional groups for these services (see Table 2).

When subjects were asked, "Who would you go to for marriage counseling?", a significantly greater proportion selected psychologists (41%) than psychiatrists (16%) z = 2.60, p<.001. The greatest number of respondents selected clergy (57%). In addition, a relatively large proportion of subjects selected social workers (26%).

Professional Preferences for Specific Mental Health Problems

The public preferred different professional groups depending upon the specific mental health problem under consideration. In response to the question, "Who would you go to for help if you were feeling anxious or depressed?", nearly equal

Table 2

The Percentage of Subjects Indicating a Preference For Specific Professional Groups for the Administration of Various Types of Psychotherapies

Questions	Psycho. %	Psychi. %	Clergy %	Physi. %	Social Worker %	DK %	Other %
Adult psycho-therapy	63	65	5	1	6	10	1
Child psycho-therapy	63	46	4	4	6	8	2
Behavior therapy	69	39	5	7	8	9	3
Marriage counseling	41	16	57	2	26	5	10
Mean	59	42	18	4	12	8	4

Note. Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers. These percentages do not sum to 100 because subjects were free to select more than one response alternative for each question.

Psycho. = Psychologist
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proportions of subjects selected psychologists (35%) and psychiatrists (29%), z = .581, p>.50. Clergy, physicians, and "other" were selected nearly as often as psychologists and psychiatrists in response to this question (see Table 3).

When subjects were asked "If a close friend of yours was suicidal, which of these professional(s) would you recommend that he/she seek out?", a significantly greater proportion of subjects selected psychiatrists (73%) than psychologists (51%), z = 2.79, p<.001. In addition, a substantial proportion of subjects indicated that they would seek out clergy (36%) in the case of potential suicide.

The public demonstrated a greater relative preference for the services of psychiatrists over psychologists in the case of nervous breakdown. In response to the question, "Who would you go to if you felt you were having a 'nervous breakdown'?", a significantly greater proportion of subjects selected the services of psychiatrists (69%) than psychologists (40%), z = 3.32, p<.001. Physicians were also selected a substantial proportion of times in response to this question (42%). Subjects rarely selected other professional groups in the case of "nervous breakdown."

Discussion

These results suggest that the majority of person residing in the Long Island, New York area possess a reasonably accurate understanding of the terms psychologist and psychiatrist. People are aware that these two professional groups possess different

Table 3

The Percentage of Subjects Indicating a Preference For Specific Professional Groups For the Treatment of Various Mental Health Problems

Questions	Psycho. %	Psychi. %	Clergy %	Physi. %	Social Worker %	DK %	Other %
Anxious or depressed	35	29	23	23	8	4	29
Friend suicidal	51	73	36	18	13	1	7
Nervous breakdown	40	69	7	42	6	2	4
Mean	42	57	22	28	9	2	13

Note. Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers. These percentages do not sum to 100 because subjects were free to select more than one response alternative for each question.

Psycho. = Psychologist
Psychi. = Psychiatrist
Physi. = Physician
DK = Don't know

educational credentials and offer different types of mental health services. Preferences for the services of psychologists and psychiatrists vary as a function of the severity of the mental health problem under consideration.

For the treatment of severe problems such as potential suicide and "nervous breakdown," psychiatrists are preferred to a greater extent than psychologists. The present findings suggest that psychiatrists are perceived to be more effective in treating serious mental health problems because of their ability to prescribe medication and admit patients to psychiatric hospitals. The impact of these treatment options upon public preferences for psychiatric services has been noted by other survey researchers (Clark & Martire, 1978; Frazier, 1981).

In areas of therapeutic practice not involving hospitalization or pharmacological treatment, the public prefers psychologists to an equal or greater extent than psychiatrists. The public expresses an equal preference for the services of psychologists and psychiatrists for the treatment of anxiety and depression in adults. In cases of child psychotherapy, marriage counseling, and behavior therapy, psychologists are preferred to a greater extent than psychiatrists. One factor which may contribute to the relative unpopularity of psychiatrists in certain therapeutic areas is the public perception that psychiatrists dispense medication too freely (Frazier, 1981, p. 146). In cases of child psychotherapy, behavior therapy, and marriage counseling the public may view pharmacological treatment as inappropriate and avoid psychiatric services as a result.

Very few persons indicate that they would seek out a social worker for the services of adult psychotherapy, child psychotherapy, or behavior therapy. These findings replicate the results of Simon (1973) and Morrison and Thomas (1975) who found that the public preferred the therapeutic services of psychologists and psychiatrists over that of social workers.

One possible explanation for the relatively low public demand for the therapeutic services of social workers could be a lack of public knowledge concerning the credentials possessed by social workers. In the present study, only 34% of subjects were aware that social workers are licensed in New York State. In spite of the competencies of well-trained psychiatric social workers, the term social worker appears to conjure up in the public mind the "image of a harried and untrained caseworker whose working conditions make competence almost impossible (Morrison & Thomas, 1975)."

One limitation to the generalizability of the present results is the fact that the study was conducted upon a suburban Long Island population. Gurin et al. (1960, p. 338) point out that mental health practitioners enjoy greater acceptance in suburban populations than rural and urban populations. As a result the present findings may over estimate the preferences and knowledge of the national population. Additional studies should serve to further delineate the applicability of the present results are to rural and urban populations.

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